

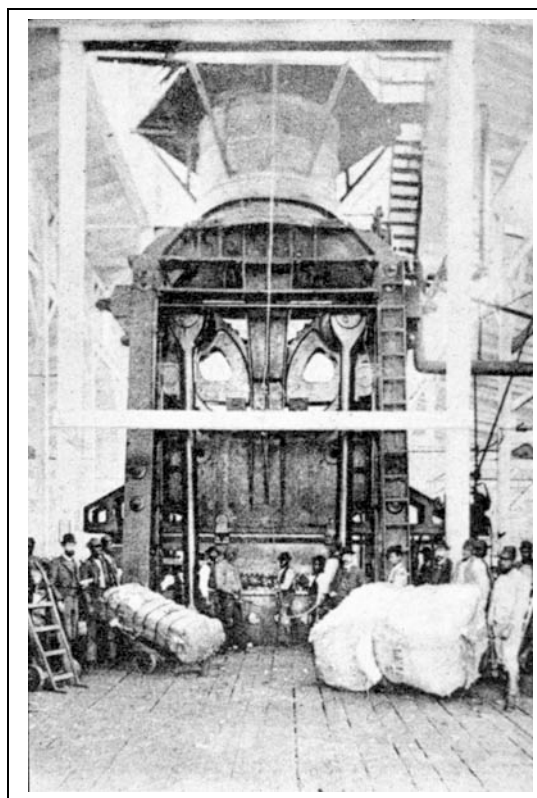


Sprunt Compress Employees

Image: New Hanover County Public Library

had only two-thirds of his workforce on hand and that shipping was being “greatly retarded” because nine ships were waiting to be cleared. It was expected that the contract for off-loading seven of those ships would expire before they could be docked. To encourage a return to normalcy for workers, Sprunt offered a rare interview to the papers in which he said that he thought quiet and peaceful blacks would not be harmed. He hoped that black workers could be convinced of their safety so they could return to work and resolve the current labor shortages. Sprunt clearly wished for his experienced, trusted, African American employees to return to work even at a time when the white labor movement was fiercely promoting the hiring of white men over black.⁹⁹

⁹⁹ Further study of Sprunt’s voluminous corporate records at Duke University might shed light on the company’s labor force, although the company apparently continued to employ African American stevedores into the twentieth century. The compress ledgers have active records for accounts and receivables, as well as references to cotton brought in and shipped out for most days of November, 1898. There are no entries for November 10 because, evidently, no work was done. As indicated by other sources, work was stopped the day of the riot.



Sprunt Compress Workers

Image: New Hanover County Public Library

Entries pick up again on the next day with business as usual. Lura Beam, a northern teacher who moved to Wilmington in 1908, noted that local African Americans highly respected the “local cotton king.” A Sprunt employee recalled that Sprunt would “provide things for the black people,” particularly at Christmas time when he would fill barrels with food and give each employee a full barrel for the holiday. Reaves, *Strength Through Struggle*, 325; *Morning Star* (Wilmington), November 13, 1898; Alexander Sprunt and Son, Account Ledgers, November, 1898, Duke University Library, Durham; Lura Beam, *He Called Them by the Lightning*, 15-36; Block, *Wilmington Through the Lens of Louis T. Moore*, 251